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SUBJECT: TAJIKISTAN'S WATER USERS ASSOCIATIONS: SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN ACTION

¶1. Summary: Winrock International's water users' associations provide an example of the kind of "bottom-up" assistance that delivers substantial and sustainable benefits to Tajikistan's poorest. During a July 20 site visit in Rudaki District, 30 miles outside Dushanbe, PolOff saw first hand how U.S. funding in this area can help farmers develop the skills and organizational capacity necessary to more effectively manage their water resources and local irrigation systems, while also promoting civil society and grass-roots partnerships between farmers and their local government. However, funding limitations are currently prohibiting the spread of this impressive program into other areas of the country. End Summary.

¶2. A decade of civil war and government neglect literally washed away Tajikistan's national and local irrigation networks. This situation led not only to decreased agricultural output, but also to friction and occasional violence between neighbors vying for limited water supplies. In order to provide a lasting solution to problems associated with water distribution, Winrock's program places as much emphasis on building organizational capacity as it does on the reconstruction of physical infrastructure. For example, association members received training in areas such as management, finance, irrigation maintenance, efficient land use, and conflict resolution. The progress made in this regard was plain to see during PolOff's site visit, as local farmers were clearly proud of their association and the results it had achieved. The association's continuing importance to the farmers was also manifest, and they stressed their desire to see its activities continue into the future.

¶3. Winrock aims to leave behind associations capable of using member fees to cover the salaries of managerial staff, and the costs of infrastructure upkeep and improvement. Sources of revenue include a fee for water usage (less than one third of one cent per square meter) and a uniform annual membership fee paid by each participating farm. Although the durability of a system based on voluntary participation might appear questionable, the association's future is safeguarded by the enormity of the benefits it provides, relative to the costs of membership. For example, one farmer claimed that after only one year of improved irrigation, his grain output per hectare of land had doubled from 1200 kg to 2500 kg. Another farmer reported even greater results, producing an impressive 5700 kg of cotton per hectare -- up from around 2500 kg before the association was established. In addition, the problem of "free-riding" is discouraged by a higher water usage fee charged to non-members who draw on water passing through the association's irrigation channels. In one instance, a local

factory that initially shied away from participation in the association begged for membership after witnessing its results.

¶4. Association members claimed to have a positive relationship with the local government -- a situation explained in large part by the important public service they provide. Indeed, association activities focus not only on repairing and maintaining the local irrigation channels feeding their own lands, but even extend to occasional work on the "external" irrigation system forming the backbone of Tajikistan's agricultural economy. In such cases, the government reportedly applies a credit to the yearly water usage fees charged to the association for the water it draws.

¶5. Comment: With the strong support of its members and the local government, the water users' associations visited by PolOff showed the potential to deliver sustainable results to the local community in the future. While we generally think of water users' associations in terms of agricultural development, it is clear that the program also promotes the development of civil society and grass-roots partnerships between local governments and the populations they serve. However, Winrock representatives noted that while the potential exists to reproduce elsewhere in Tajikistan the positive trends in reconstruction and cooperation witnessed in Rudaki District, funding limitations mean that 11 of Winrock's 26 associations currently exist on paper only -- organized and ready to begin work, but without the money necessary to get started. End Comment.

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